

Gendered Spaces and Status: A Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

Spaces define the lives of people who are a part of them. The existence of human beings in particular spaces is governed by various factors such as financial resources, social structure, cultural and traditional setup, location of action, etc. Gender is instrumental in the construction and understanding of the behavior patterns as well as identity construction for individuals. Social life of people takes place in spaces that are inherently gendered and locate men and women in them according to the roles that they perform. Gender roles are associated with the genders because of repetitive patterns of historical practice. The status position of any person is defined by their identity that they maintain and the widely held status beliefs that predominate. The objective of this paper is to trace and establish a relationship between gender, space and status. The current paper focuses on exploring the theoretical aspects of social status and gendered spaces and how they influence each other in individual experiences.

Keywords: Experience, Social Stratification, Status, Gender, Gendered Space.

Introduction

To live and experience life is the primary objective of any individual. Experiences of individuals are defined and regulated by several factors which work together and in an active relationship with each other. There cannot be one single factor which can explain the lived experiences of people in a society. Traditional and cultural practices, gender norms, use and understanding of space, socio-cultural and economic status, etc., influence one another in creating a confusing yet smoothly functional society.

Power of gender norms and practices is generally observed in lived experiences of people. All existent social structures function according to gender norms known to the common public. Gender tends to create a categorical expression of reality for all the members of a society based on biological sex, regardless of their preferences and abilities. Opinions provide an understanding of the social expectations associated with particular gender and their physical strength.

Language has enacted an essential role in giving meaning to terms like 'male', 'female', 'man', 'woman', 'gender', 'sex', etc., by repetitive usage to indicate and

explain particular individuals and bringing them into the everyday speech of day-to-day routine. The structuralist approach to language suggests that meanings are arbitrary and have been constructed over a period of time by repeated use of a specific term for a particular entity. It is quite possible that the one who is called male, could also be very well called female. Judith Butler in her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* says that,

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one. (Butler 6)

The entire life of a person is created by the behaviors and practices that they follow, influenced by the social identity ascribed to them. Sociologists consider social stratification as a critical aspect of overall power, authority and agency a person holds. It is also responsible for what they term as 'social status', something which emerges out of the differences that exist between the members of the

same society. A certain amount of prestige is attached to different roles performed by individuals in society, and it provides them with necessary amount of power connected with it. Acc. to Ralph Linton, status can be defined as “a collection of roles and duties” (113). Another influential sociologist, Max Weber defines status as, “positive or negative social estimation of honor” (Gerth and Mills 187). Gender too, is considered a status category by theorists of role and stratification theory. They believe that gender as a status ‘defines the social position that any individual holds, to choose their interactions and their relationship with others’. It can be conveniently said that the status ascribed to genders is directly and indirectly influenced by social roles assigned to persons based on their biological sex.

Social status is an essential aspect of their lives for people who are curious to make sense of the belongingness vested in their selves. Status according to the stratification principle of sociology, can be either ascribed to a person or be acquired by them. Status of a person is reflective of their position within a particular set of people depending on age, sex, race, education, income, occupation, etc. A higher status would denote possession of a subject position at the command of the individual, for being exerted on the one that is the ‘Other’.

The binary relation between culture and nature promotes a relationship of hierarchy in which culture freely “imposes” meaning on nature, and hence, renders it into an “Other” to be appropriated to its own limitless uses, safeguarding the ideality of the signifier and the structure of signification on the model of domination. (Butler 37)

Max Weber’s idea of social stratification based on status position, popularized the differences of domination and control on the basis of social position that an individual holds. Joseph Berger and his colleagues, formulated the Expectation States Theory to study how the performance expectations associated with different genders influence the general conception of status they hold in the society. Expectation States Theory works on the concept of status beliefs, which they say “are a major determinant of gender inequality precisely because men and women interact so frequently under the conditions in which status beliefs shape people’s behaviour and evaluations.” (Ridgeway and Bourq 223)

Cecilia Ridgeway in *Status: Why is it Everywhere? Why Does it Matter?* explains status as a “comparative social ranking of people, groups, or objects in terms of the social esteem, honour, and respect accorded to them” (1). Status hierarchies are shaped by the social status beliefs which prevail in structural setups of the conduction of life and actions by men and women alike. Ridgeway considers status beliefs to be “widely held cultural beliefs that link greater social significance and general competences, as well as positive and negative skills with one category of social distinction compared to another.” (Ridgeway, “Gender, Status, and Leadership” 638). Status beliefs frame the awareness of individuals about their personal identity and position in society relative to that of others. The repetitive use and practice of conventional roles and responsibilities solidifies the widespread beliefs to increase their significance in the lives of people to influence their perception of themselves.

Status however, is relatively associated with gender norms. Differences and inequalities shape with the help of prevailing cultural and traditional practices. Status beliefs as correctly considered highly influenced by gender hierarchies eventually come down to the understanding of status positions connected to gender identities of standard practice. Ridgeway and Bourq, in their discussion of the relationship between gender and status, suggest that the superiority of men over women is propagated through popular cultural practices: “because gender is associated with status in cultural beliefs, it becomes a principle for organizing social relations in terms of not only difference but also of hierarchy and inequality” (Ridgeway and Bourq 217).

Gender based stratification of society and division of labor amongst the two genders, breaks up social and economic spaces for men and women, according to their repetitive use of these spaces for performance of specific roles and responsibilities agreeing with the conventionally held beliefs. Man and woman, which are the two basic gender categories, perform specific roles to co-exist with each other in this world. Roles are different for them based on their physical strength and historical practice. Both are expected to hold up to their assigned roles, and any deviation from the set standard is not appreciated. It is just

a matter of convenience that men have been dominating women for centuries without any contest to challenge their superiority.

Seclusion of women has been a prevalent practice since the 17th century in most cultures of the world. Experiences of seclusion trap women to live lives under supervision. The terminology associated with seclusion – Purdah, Harem, and Zenana – has been inflated over the years to perpetuate the power and control vested in patriarchal notions and given the name of tradition. Women experienced seclusion and containment until they realized that it was not the only fate that they had been born with. Propagation of popular culture through oral tradition strengthened the divisive mentality in the society. Textual and visual representations of women and their ideality in advertisements, newspapers, magazines, pamphlets and literature helped to popularize the conception of a secluded existence for women and men. A life where both co-exist but not with each other.

Spaces develop a system of their own, by repetition over the years it becomes a norm. Dualistic interpretations of spaces suggested by the Marxist geographers contradict with the singularity of spaces in geographical interpretation. Social stratification, in turn works to amplify the influence of these spaces on the framing of a woman's conception of their femininity, subjectivities and identities. Chris Barker in *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies* suggests that, "It is necessary to grasp human activity as distributed in space since human interaction is situated in particular spaces that have variety of social meanings" (186). This view is indicative of the significance that spaces hold in defining the mobility, agency, identity and status of individuals belonging to specific genders. Gender-based practices that commonly take place in particular spaces conventionalize those spaces to be regulated by them for future use.

Space is not just a "passive locus of social relations" (11), it is a product of individual understanding and utilisation of a particular space for specific purposes over for a long period of time repetitively. Henri Lefebvre in his *Production of Space* (1974) rejects the initial conception of space being a geometrical absolute and a void like energy or time, and proposes instead that "(Social) space is a

(social) product" (26) and this space can be produced in a variety of ways. The history of space, spatial practice, representational coding of space, and sensory abstractions of space work to produce a social space. Space thus constitutes multitudes of interrelationships and interconnections between the 'absolute' and 'real' social existence.

Logic system of the gender organisation accordingly in different spaces plays with the ideology and reception of these physical spaces in gendered terms. As Doreen Massey considers that a space is "always in the process of making", the contribution of gender matrix in the process cannot be overlooked. Physical gendered spaces are constructed from the places in which the gender roles are performed. These spaces constructed to suit the needs of a particular time assume an absolute status and influence in turn the formation of gender relations and behaviour patterns for the future generations.

Spatial segregation is one of the mechanisms by which a group with greater power can maintain its advantage over a group with less power. By controlling access to knowledge and resources through the control of space, the dominant group's ability to retain and reinforce its position is enhanced. (Spain, "Gendered Spaces" 15-16)

Daphne Spain in her book *Gendered Spaces* (1992) talks about, how the spatial segregation of genders promotes and perpetuates a women's lower status compared to that of men. Spaces for her are sites of value and knowledge, which when restricted for women also restrict their access to information. Organisation of such spaces according to her, help in "perpetuating status differences" and maintaining the stratification system of the society. She highlights that affluent societies, capable of allocating separate areas for men and women, visibly embody the gendering of space to uphold the social standing of their inhabitants. She considers that poverty necessitates gender integration, as economic constraints make it impractical to maintain spaces designated for specific genders.

In her article titled "Gendered Spaces and Women's Status" (1993), Spain continues her discussion about the relationship of women's status with the physical separation

of spaces. She writes, "Women's position within society, whether measured as power, prestige, economic position, or social rank, is related to spatial segregation insofar as existing physical arrangements facilitate or inhibit the exchange of knowledge between those with the greater and those with lesser status."

She addresses the issues of 'choice' and 'preference' of women being heavily influenced by their responsibilities. Alternatively, she states that gendered spaces sometimes also work to empower women by providing them with their personal space to be creative and productive. She believes that the maintenance of the stratification system and lower status of women is because "once in place," these established gendered spaces "come to be taken for granted".

Doreen Massey too in her collection of essays *Space, place and Gender* (1994), presents the view that, "The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple" (5). She says that "Geography matters to the construction of gender" (2). Such a construction leads to a sensitisation of the understandings of space, place and gender and their interrelations with each other. In her paper of the same title, she highlights that every space and place, along with our perception of them, is inherently influenced by gender. This gendering manifests in diverse ways that vary across cultures and evolves. Her conclusion posits that the construction and understanding of gender are intricately shaped by specific society and culture in which we reside.

Gendered spaces, being intricately structured and precisely conceptualised to facilitate the separation of genders into different spaces contribute to the analysis of existing disparities between them. Gender and social roles draw ideological boundaries contributing to stigmatic perceptions of identity, experience, subjectivity, resistance and memory. Social norms and Cultural values of particular observers and lived experiences of people provide testimony to the intricate relationship that space has with the formation and understanding of the reciprocal impact of gender on the use of designated spaces and associated sociocultural status ascribed to different genders.

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